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Clashing Traditions: German Foreign Policy in a New Era

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Abstract: A series of crises over the last decade have put pressure on Europe's fundamental ordering principles. In response, German policymakers have scrambled to reinterpret Germany's foreign policy for a new era. To understand this process, the authors utilize an interpretivist approach, analyzing the discourse of German foreign policymakers through the lens of four traditions of thought informing debates: regionalism, pacifism, realism, and hegemonism. The article suggests that despite serious challenges, prevailing patterns of belief centered round regionalism and pacifism, supported by a particular civilian understanding of hegemony, persist. Yet, Germany's allies are challenging this framework and calling for it to accept more responsibility for regional and global security. As a result, a realist tradition is reemerging in Germany's discourse. The taxonomy provided here allows a richer understanding of these debates as well as an appreciation of how policymakers mobilize ideas to resist or enable policy change.

Resumen: Una serie de crisis ocurridas a lo largo de la última década han ejercido presión sobre los principios fundamentales de ordenamiento de Europa. En respuesta, los encargados de la formulación de políticas alemanes se apresuraron a reinterpretar la política exterior de Alemania para una nueva era. Para entender este proceso, los autores utilizan un enfoque interpretativista y analizan el discurso de los encargados de la formulación de políticas alemanes a través de la óptica de cuatro tradiciones de pensamiento que alimentan los debates: regionalismo, pacifismo, realismo y hegemonismo. En el artículo se sugiere que pese a los graves desafíos, persisten los patrones dominantes de creencias centradas en el regionalismo y el pacifismo, respaldados por un entendimiento civil particular de la hegemonía. Aún así, los aliados alemanes están cuestionando este marco y exigiendo la aceptación por su parte de una mayor responsabilidad para la seguridad regional y global. Como resultado, está resurgiendo una tradición realista en el discurso de Alemania. La taxonomía que aquí se proporciona permite un entendimiento más cabal de estos debates así como una apreciación de cómo los encargados de la formulación de políticas movilizan ideas para resistir o propiciar un cambio de política.

Résumé: Au cours des dernières décennies, plusieurs crises sont venues mettre à mal les principes ordonnateurs fondamentaux de l'Europe. En conséquence, les responsables politiques allemands n'ont pas ménagé leurs efforts pour donner une nouvelle interprétation de la politique étrangère de l'Allemagne et marquer le début d'une nouvelle ère. Pour comprendre ce processus, les auteurs utilisent une approche interprétativiste, analysant le discours des responsables allemands de

politique étrangère à travers le prisme de quatre débats traditionnels alimentant la réflexion politique: le régionalisme, le pacifisme, le réalisme et l'hégémonisme. L'article suggère que, malgré de sérieux défis, un ensemble dominant de croyances axées sur le régionalisme et le pacifisme—soutenu par une compréhension précise de l'hégémonie par les citoyens—persiste. Cependant, les alliés de l'Allemagne contestent ce cadre et lui demande de prendre une plus grande responsabilité dans la sécurité régionale et mondiale. Par conséquent, une tradition réaliste est en train de réapparaître dans le discours allemand. La taxonomie fournie ici permet de comprendre plus précisément ces débats et d'apprécier comment les responsables politiques mobilisent leurs idées pour résister au changement de politique ou lui permettre d'avoir lieu.

Keywords: German foreign policy, interpretivism, realism, pacifism, hegemony

“The era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent.” (Angela Merkel, May 28, 2017)

This is an important moment for German foreign policymakers and for Germany's place in the European and international order. A series of problems have rocked the foundations of European security in recent years, including the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Arab Spring, the Mediterranean refugee crisis, and the Eurozone and global financial crises. Two more are hinted at in the Chancellor's speech quoted above, namely, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. Trump's election led to the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Climate Change agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, as well as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty. Thus, the change in the US administration undermined key German policy priorities. More broadly, Brexit and the election of Trump threatened the two essential principles of European regional order—economic and political integration, guarded by the collective defense umbrella of NATO. A weakening of either of these would have major implications for German foreign policy.

Brexit represents a rejection of integration as a self-evident good and an end in itself. Without the balancing effect of the United Kingdom in the European Union, Germany's dominance of European politics is brought into sharp relief (Grant 2016). This carries the potential for resentment over Germany's influence among other EU member states, even as Germany faces calls to increase its contribution to economic stability and as diplomacy regionally commensurate with its size (Bindenagel 2015). Meanwhile, Trump's rhetoric raises the prospect of the United States weakening its commitment to European defense. At times, he has implied that NATO's Article 5 provisions for collective defense are only applicable to countries that meet spending targets (Gray 2017). German-US relations have become fraught, with the German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, even talking about the European Union needing to balance against the United States and act as a “conscious counterweight when the US oversteps red lines” (Davis 2018). At the same time, the United Kingdom initiated Brexit negotiations by hinting that security cooperation in the region would be conditional on a trade deal (May 2017). If the United States and United Kingdom do reduce their contributions to European security, Germany will have to take up the burden as the most powerful economic actor in the region.

In this context, German policymakers are debating what leadership means for them and whether Germany should contribute more to international security and stability. Merkel argued in the election speech above that “[w]e Europeans truly

have to take our fate into our own hands—naturally in friendship with the United States of America, in friendship with Great Britain, . . . [and] we have to know that we Europeans must fight for our own future and destiny” (Paravicini 2017). Merkel’s emphasis on “[w]e Europeans” in this context is telling, reaffirming European identity but also presenting this as a collective problem for the region rather than a national one for Germans to address. How far this framing is sustainable is open to question given Germany’s primacy in the region. In reality, German foreign policymakers will have to make choices about how to respond to these challenges, albeit in consultation with other states, and German taxpayers will have to pay for them.

Questions arise, such as whether Germany should affirm its Europeaness or “Germanness.” Should it seek global or regional influence? Will history continue to constrain Germany’s interventions abroad or will Germany’s past become less relevant for its foreign policy? If Germany is to lead, who will its followers be and how will this relationship function? Can you be a responsible leader and a civilian power—especially if military threats emerge to regional order? These questions highlight a series of dilemmas over German identity,¹ its regional and global positions, and its foreign policy choices. How Germany answers these questions will have implications for the region and the wider world. This is the case, most notably, for the post-Brexit prospects of European integration and the future of the transatlantic security architecture in the context of the Trump presidency.

The central argument of the article is that German foreign policymakers interpret and approach the dilemmas they face through the lens of broad traditions of thought about Germany’s identity, how Germany should interact with other states, and how it should define its responsibilities in the international arena. Along these lines, the article makes two main contributions to scholarship on Germany’s foreign policy trajectory and its position in the European and international order. First, the article develops a taxonomy of the traditions of thought that are most salient in German foreign policy discussions. Second, it maps how the traditions are instantiated in speeches of selected German policymakers. The analysis shows that, while the overall configuration of these traditions of thought is rather stable, the different traditions exist in tension with each other. The interplay of those traditions orients the foreign policy beliefs of German policymakers.

Specifically, the interpretive framework of this article identifies four traditions of thought that stand out in German foreign policy debates, namely, regionalism, pacifism, realism, and hegemonism. For each tradition, we examine how it informs discussion about German identity, Germany’s interactions with other states, and Germany’s responsibilities (see Figure 1). These three themes were chosen as they seem to speak most loudly to recent dilemmas about how German policymakers perceive German identity and how others view it, how these ideas are shaped in practice through interactions with other states, and how responsibility as a concept is used to construct a moral geography of Germany’s duties and obligations.

The article employs this framework to understand how German policymakers are doing the work of interpreting their national identity and defining appropriate action in response to the dilemmas facing German foreign policy. To do so, we employ an interpretivist approach informed by the work of Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006, 2012). Starting from an ontological stance that is heavily influenced by hermeneutics and that shares the constructivist emphasis on the intersubjective and social character of meaning (Hay 2011, 168–174), interpretivists have developed a distinct research program that sees policy understandings as shaped by broad traditions of thought constituted by sets of beliefs (Bever and Rhodes 2006, 92; Bevir, Daddow, and Hall 2014; Hall 2014). Traditions are not immutable, rather they serve as

¹ When we refer to identity, we mean the essential characteristics of an entity that define them as a separate, existing thing—in this case, the political community of Germany (Steele 2008; Williams 2009).

<i>Interpretive Dimensions</i> <i>Traditions of Thought</i>	Identity	Interaction	Responsibility
Regionalism	Beliefs about Germany's identity as a foreign policy actor and its place in the world	Beliefs about appropriate patterns of behavior towards other actors in the international arena	Beliefs about how Germany should define and fulfill its international duties and obligations
Pacifism			
Realism			
Hegemonism			

Figure 1. Interpretive Framework

organizing dynamics, made up of “sets of beliefs people inherit and then adapt for reasons of their own” (Bevir and Rhodes 2012, 201). This concept of a tradition is paired with that of dilemma, since it is when policymakers are presented with a dilemma that they are compelled to articulate their beliefs and rationalize them. In doing so, they both evoke existing traditions and reimagine them in light of current circumstances, allowing for a continual process of meaning production and reformulation, rendering events intelligible and orienting political action (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 36).

To appreciate how German policymakers are responding to dilemmas over German identity and how Germany should act in the world, we need to look at the beliefs and traditions that pervade in this practice. To that purpose, the article is organized around the three interpretative dimensions of our framework: identity, interactions, and responsibility. For each dimension, the discussion begins by outlining prevailing traditions and beliefs and then proceeds by mapping out how these are evoked and adapted in policy speeches.

The period for analysis is between November 2014 and July 2017 during the tenure of the 2013–2017 grand coalition between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD). This date range was selected to encompass the pre-Brexit referendum and post-Trump election periods to identify any effects these events may have had on the discourse of German foreign policymakers. The dataset of policy speeches was derived from the German government website, which lists 31 speeches on foreign policy by five German policymakers: Chancellor Angela Merkel from the center-right CDU, Federal President Joachim Gauck (Independent), Foreign Minister (until January 27, 2017) and then Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, and Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth (the latter three from the center-left SPD).² The authors conducted a textual analysis of the content (diction used, predicates, images, and metaphors applied) as well as the structure of language use (frames, narratives, and discourses deployed) in the speeches (Milliken 1999; Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 171; Fairclough 2003). The aim was to probe the expression of belief and thereby gain a greater understanding of how these

² Our selection of speakers focuses on offices in the German executive that the government website defines as representing German foreign policy, namely the Chancellery, the Federal Presidency, and the Foreign Ministry. This allows us to consider the understanding of foreign policy being projected by the government on its own terms but does mean we do not analyze in depth other departmental perspectives, for example, from the ministry of defence or the ministry for economic cooperation and development. This excludes some prominent participants in German foreign policy debates, most notably, defence minister Ursula von der Leyen, because the website does not label their speeches as foreign policy. While this restricts the scope of our textual analysis, it should not compromise the overall purpose of the article as a representative range of voices is included.

policymakers were utilizing traditions to make sense of the dilemmas they faced and how they felt Germany should respond to them.

Traditions in German Foreign Policy

From a preliminary reading of the literature on German foreign policy, four implied traditions of thought can be identified: regionalism (Katzenstein 1997; Proissl 2010), pacifism (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2005; Rathbun 2006), realism (Hellmann 2009), and hegemonism (Paterson 2011; Bulmer and Paterson 2013). The shape and interplay of these traditions are inexorably linked to Germany's historical guilt, and their relevance and salience in foreign policy debates will be demonstrated in the course of this article with reference to both academic literature and policy statements. Following Bevir and Rhodes (2006), we do not see the traditions as fixed or uncontested, but as coordinating mechanisms for the expression of beliefs. These traditions exist simultaneously, either contradicting or complementing each other in policy discourse.³ What is curious is that they are never considered together in the literature. Commentators will contrast one with another, but never look at all four simultaneously to understand the way they interact. Thus, the existing literature arguably misses the extent to which German policymakers rely upon the dynamic interplay of meaning between all these traditions to interpret policy dilemmas.

Traditional Beliefs about German Identity

The four traditions of thought imply different ideas about the context in which Germany can express its identity. Regionalism evokes a postsovereign world in which national identities are subsumed within wider regional frameworks. Pacifism sees certain states as abandoning militarism and defining themselves in nonmilitary terms (implying either a division of labor between states or a postconflict world). Realism conceptualizes normal states as those that act according to their material capabilities and self-interests (thus, a powerful state such as Germany would be expected to use force or threats of force at times to pursue national goals). Hegemonism conjures up a hierarchical world where those with preponderant resources are compelled to act as hegemons—acting to maintain the regional or international system and contribute to public goods. In the academic literature, these traditions are associated with four descriptors: Germany as European (Banchoff 1999; Liebert 2010), Germany as a civilian power (Harnisch and Maull 2001; Wolff 2013), Germany as a normal power (Hampton 2000; Baumann and Hellmann 2001), and Germany as a reluctant hegemon (Paterson 2011; Bulmer and Paterson 2013).

If we look at each in turn, we can see that the subordination of German identity within a regional European framework has been a hallmark of its framing since the end of the Second World War. Unlike other regional powers like Britain and France, who retained their identities as global actors, German policymakers interpreted their national position and sense of self in wholly regional terms (Janes 2008, 8). The logic of this framing was to reject a nationalist identity harking back to the Nazi era (Galpin 2017, 110). Regionalism was also bolstered by the institutional structures emerging in the postwar period. The pooling of industrial infrastructure and sovereignty associated with European integration enabled Germany to be

³ In the case of regionalism and hegemonism, these terms are used by the authors to encompass phenomena that are identifiable in the discourse even if different words are sometimes used. For instance, it is commonplace to describe Germany's foreign policy with reference to its contribution to regional integration, commitment to multilateralism, and European identity, which, when combined, amount to regionalism. Meanwhile, hegemony is evoked more by academics and commentators than practitioners and refers to the (often unintended) effect that Germany's primacy in the region has on its power relations with neighboring states as well as its obligations (Kindleberger 1981; Paterson 2011). We include it here since the underlying phenomenon it describes clearly shapes policymakers' beliefs.

reintegrated into regional decision-making without seeming to dominate (Galpin 2017, 110), paving the way for its reunification and legitimation as a sovereign and reformed state.

Emerging in tandem with this framing was the idea of Germany as a “civilian power” (Crawford 2010, 170, 172). Since the European community was an economic and political union devised to avoid military conflict, it provided the perfect forum for Germany to exert influence while avoiding the militarism and will to power of its history. Although antimilitarism would be a strong and continuing force in German politics, the idea that Germany rejects coercive diplomacy has been questioned by some commentators. Luttwak (1990) famously argued that Germany acts as a “geo-economic power,” coercing other actors to assert its economic interests, albeit via civilian rather than military means; however, this is not a description with which Germans have self-identified.

The dilemmas of the 1990s inhibited the full realization of the civilian power idea (Mauß 2000a). In particular, the problem of how to respond to ethnic conflict and human rights violations in the Balkans, Somalia, and Rwanda brought to the fore the tensions between two key lessons of Germany’s past—“never again war” and “never again Auschwitz” (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2005). This forced policymakers to rethink and redefine Germany’s civilian power approach. After a landmark ruling of the constitutional court in 1994 permitted out-of-area military operations of the German Bundeswehr (if approved by parliament), German combat troops were deployed in Kosovo in 1999. Commentators saw this as Germany becoming a “normal” power—in the sense of a state less constrained by its past and able to use force where necessary (Hampton 2000; Mauß 2000b; Baumann and Hellmann 2001).

Ever since, Germany’s record of involvement in multilateral interventions has been mixed. After 9/11, German troops deployed to Afghanistan, albeit with restrictive rules of engagement, and posted to Northern Iraq to undertake training missions. Germany has participated in a naval mission to Lebanon as well, among other operations. However, Germany did not participate in the UN-approved operations in Libya in 2011—provoking a domestic debate at the time (Kappel 2014). Subsequent crises in the Eurozone, the Crimea, and the Mediterranean have seen Germany adopt leadership roles in managing them but the extent to which it did so of its own volition rather than because allies and circumstances required it to is debatable. Critics have seen Germany as a “reluctant hegemon,” with German policymakers fearing that adopting more assertive and militaristic policies will come with high costs and go against the cooperative, multilateral, and civilian self-image that has been entrenched in German discourse for decades (Bulmer and Paterson 2013). It is against this backdrop that contemporary policymakers are looking to define German identity.

German Identity in Policy Speeches

The portrayal of German identity in regional terms is immediately apparent in the speeches we examined. Addressing audiences outside Europe, Angela Merkel frequently refers to “[w]e Europeans” and “[w]e in Europe” in preference to Germany or Germans (Merkel 2014; Merkel 2017a). As the influential 2016 White Paper on German security policy and the future of the Bundeswehr put it, “German identity is inseparably connected with European identity” (Federal Government 2016, 22). A defining feature of Germany’s European identity is a commitment to integration. Speaking to her diplomatic corps in 2015, Merkel asserted, “we should not lose sight of how precious the idea of European integration is. More than 500 million people live in a community of law founded on shared responsibility—in a community of shared values” (Merkel 2015a). Integration is conveyed in terms of increasing institutionalization and connectedness internally, as well as cohesiveness in policy coordination. Setting out a series of challenges, including human trafficking, border

control, extradition, and refugees, Merkel repeatedly argues that “only together” can these be managed (Merkel 2015b).

In this sense, regionalism is posited in opposition to a more realist understanding of the world, made up of self-interested states acting with autonomy. Rather, we read in the speeches an advancement of a collective regional identity, one of greater utility in dealing with challenges as well as embodying shared values and beliefs. However, there is a tension evident in the speeches between the egalitarian ethos of integration and an implied hierarchy of leadership that threatens to undermine EU cohesion. On the one hand, Merkel (2017a) argues “we need to do more to join up military capabilities. We need leadership within the European Union.” Here leadership is implied as emerging from Franco-German cooperation, which can then be the basis of European initiatives. This hints at the underlying disparities in capability among EU member states and the necessity of more powerful states shouldering a greater amount of the burden of maintaining regional public goods such as security—hegemonism. Yet, on the other hand, policymakers frequently downplay this idea and subsume German identity within the European Union institutional framework. This framing is most obvious in the speeches of Sigmar Gabriel. As he puts it:

My greatest worry is that this splitting up of Europe has already begun. I find it flattering when China, the United States, and Russia keep wanting to negotiate with Germany—but there is a danger in it too. It is a trap we mustn’t fall into. We need to make it clear at all times that, yes, we are happy to talk . . . but it is ultimately not enough to talk to Germany; everyone here is worth the same. Europe has far more small countries than large ones. . . . The smaller member states in particular need to know that we see them as equal partners, on an equal footing (Gabriel 2017a).

Gabriel’s uneasiness about efforts to single out Germany as holding disproportionate influence is emblematic of the “reluctant hegemon” identity (Bulmer and Paterson 2013). Aware that Germany may “come across as presuming to take the lead politically, economically, and, ultimately, militarily,” Gabriel wishes policy to be “a little more informed by the Bonn Republic and a little less by the Berlin Republic” (i.e., harkening back to an era when Germany was not so dominant in the region) (Gabriel 2017b). If one’s view of Germany is benign, this can be seen as a genuine attempt to democratize decision-making by redistributing Germany’s resources and bargaining power in the service of regional public goods. Gabriel looks to forego short-term interest to ensure the cohesion of the European Union—contrary to realist expectations—and so the regionalist tradition is ascendant.

A more critical view might see this as a strategy to mask Germany’s preponderance of influence. European integration reduces the risk of other European states balancing German power and enhances its legitimacy and authority in regional decision-making. Germany’s economic size is a brute fact that informs the choices of its European counterparts, even in a situation of theoretical and institutional equality. Yet, there is no sense in the speeches that commitment to a regional identity is based on a transactional belief in its utility in masking German power. Instead, we see the regular rejection of realism, as well as the identification of regionalism with pacific tendencies (Merkel 2015c).

Thus, although Germany has formally agreed to the NATO commitment for all states to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense, this was controversial among the coalition partners. Gabriel (2017b) rejected this aspiration, stating, “I doubt whether this would be in line with the concept of interconnected and common security.” Rather, he asserted, “I’m not so sure whether our European partners would . . . consider this to be an especially safe bet” since this would mean Germany spending

70 billion Euros a year on the Bundeswehr—implying that a militarily powerful Germany might make EU partners feel more threatened than secure (Gabriel 2017b). Here, the traditions of regionalism and pacifism are dominant over the more realist or hegemonic understandings of German identity. This is not to imply that Gabriel is a pacifist, rather that Germany's identity as a civilian power, informed by pacifism, leads him to reject policies that might encourage a more realist regional environment.

In short, what does not come through in the rhetoric of German policymakers is a desire to be a “normal” power—if this is defined in terms of pursuing narrow self-interest or having a role in the world commensurate with Germany's material resources. Indeed, the emphasis on Germany's “European” identity and uneasiness with bilateralism constitute a rejection of the normal politics of national interest. Policymakers identify German interests closely with a collective European interest such that they resist any sense of privileged national status. This reverses a framing that became central to German government discourse under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in the late 1990s of Germany as a “normal country in Europe” that is self-confident in using its resources to pursue its national interests—“just like others do as well” (Oppermann 2012). Rather, the minister for Europe argues that, “in the global pond, we're a pretty small fish on our own,” and there is a tendency to downplay Germany's influence at the global level (Roth 2017).

Thus, we see a high level of continuity in the speeches with more longstanding ways of perceiving German identity—including the downgrading of military power, an emphasis on regionalism, and the rejection of hierarchies created by Germany's hegemonic position relative to other regional states. We will now analyze the way Germany's interactions with other states are interpreted to see how these line up with reference to this configuration of traditions.

Traditional Beliefs about Germany's Interactions

The dominant tradition shaping Germany's interactions with other states is often identified as its commitment to regionalism and, by extension, multilateralism (Anderson 1997). These are seen as emblematic of the country's turn from aggressive nationalism and are posited as public goods in themselves. German foreign policy is said to favor cooperation and dialogue over coercion and has strong pacifist underpinnings (for a critique of this view, see Rathbun 2006). Hegemonism, if taken to mean larger states dominating smaller ones on the basis of hierarchies of power, is rejected as leading down the path to nationalism; though the idea of a benign hegemony—with Germany accepting a leadership role in multilateral action—is encouraged, provided it is consensual and decisions are arrived at collectively.

Yet, there is an undertone of realism when it comes to Germany's alignment with other regional powers. Two concepts have vied for influence in this regard, namely Atlanticism and Ostpolitik. The first frames Germany's position in terms of a strategic triangle between Germany, France, and the United States (Haftendorn and Kolkman 2004). In this structure, Germany and France are the drivers of European integration, ensuring economic security and diffusing past animosities. Germany plays the role of faithful ally to the United States while the latter acts as the guarantor of European, and so German, military security. The United Kingdom is of secondary importance to these bilateral relationships but has been encouraged to increase its engagement in European affairs to lessen Germany's dependence on France (Haftendorn and Kolkman 2004). Overall, the Atlanticist position looks west and aligns Germany with other advanced economies sharing its liberal democratic values.

The contrasting tradition of Ostpolitik emerged during the Cold War and was advocated by the West German Chancellor Willy Brandt. It aimed to engage the Soviet Union, Poland, and East Germany and thereby ease tensions and promote dialogue

(Rahr 2007). Such engagement did not involve a wholesale realignment of German foreign policy orientation—indeed, it was predicated on the continuance of NATO membership and European integration to underpin Germany's strength (Chiwvis and Rid 2009, 106). Nevertheless, Ostpolitik entailed divergence from Western allies at times and a greater sympathy for the interests of Eastern powers. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ostpolitik is said to have morphed into a “Russia First” policy under the direction of Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder. This strategy sought accommodation with Russia and its incorporation into the decision-making of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, G7, and the Council of Europe. Orientation eastwards reached its apotheosis in 2003 as Germany split with the United States and opposed the Iraq invasion (Yoder 2011, 367).

Since then, Ostpolitik has declined as relations between Russia and Europe and the United States have worsened (Forsberg 2016). Russia's reaction to the Orange revolution and its assertive energy policy toward former Soviet states led to a cooling of German-Russian links at the end of the Schröder administration. Merkel's election in 2005 was a shift back to the Atlanticist position Germany held during the Cold War (Williamson 2006, 6). Merkel took a strong line on Russian behavior in the Ukraine, coordinating condemnation of Russian annexation of Crimea and subversion in Eastern Ukraine and supporting robust sanctions despite the cost to German economic interests. Germany's role and Angela Merkel's personal engagement in the crisis were widely judged favorably on the international stage (Hellmann 2016, 8), and President Barack Obama singled out Merkel as his “closest international partner” (Reuters 2016). This warmth was threatened by the election of President Trump. Without the surety of US support for its security, Germany will have to bolster its own defenses or align itself more closely with Russia to protect its interests.

What marks these concepts as realist are the implied elements of self-interest and power calculation each exhibits, combined with the transactional nature of such shifts. There is no sense that Ostpolitik was informed by any value alignment with Russia. Similarly, the Atlanticist turn in the mid-2000s was a reaction against Russia's interference in the domestic politics of its neighboring states—moves that threatened regional stability—rather than identification with the Bush administration. It is not hard to see how the traditions of regionalism, pacifism, and hegemonism might be in tension with these realist imaginings. While the first three coalesce around the image of Germany as a civilian power operating in a postconflict milieu, Atlanticism and Ostpolitik remind us that a competitor state, Russia, exists in Germany's proximity; Germany's identity as a civilian power is ultimately reliant on the contrasting militarism of the United States (and lesser powers such as the United Kingdom and France). For this reason, the dilemmas of Trump and Brexit are important as they threaten to expose these contradictions in Germany's foreign policy. The following section explores how policymakers have articulated their responses to these dilemmas and utilized traditional ideas to justify their beliefs about how Germany should act toward other states.

German Interactions in Policy Speeches

In the period analyzed, a series of anniversaries commemorating the First and Second World Wars compelled policymakers to situate themselves within a negative historical narrative of interactions with other states. Merkel begins many of her speeches by reflecting on Germany's negative role in the early twentieth century and contrasting it with current attitudes. In doing so, she frequently praises Germany's former adversaries and the role they played in resisting Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany. In February 2015, she stated, “Germany remains forever grateful to the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe for courageously and honorably standing up for their freedom and independence, for this also paved the way for Germany

to reunify in peace and freedom” (Merkel 2015c). The actions of the Soviet Union and the United States are conveyed as liberating Germany as well as the occupied territories, and after 1945, Merkel argues, “[w]e have our partners and friends in Europe and the United States of America to thank for the integration of our country in the international community” (Merkel 2015a).

This framing serves a dual function. On the one hand, it represents a reimagining of historical interactions, enabling Germany to play a prominent role in its region and endow its pacifist tendencies with a moral authority. Germany’s past nationalism is conveyed as colonizing the German people as well as the occupied territories. This is underscored by the association of Germany with the past and Europe and Europeans with the present (Merkel 2014). An implied equality of suffering is set forth—allowing Germany to reintegrate into the international community on the basis that it too suffered from past dogmas and is now free. Rather than a pariah, Germany becomes a paragon of a reformed state.

On the other hand, this inhibits German freedom of action and restricts the expression of more militaristic tropes associated with realism. In the process, Germany’s ability to respond to threats and use force in the service of national or regional goals is limited. Thus, Merkel notes, “[a]fter the terrible war in the Balkans in the 1990s, we are once again being forced to experience what it’s like when peace and stability in Europe are called into question and the use of force becomes a bitter reality” (Merkel 2015c). Merkel outlines Germany’s involvement in NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and asserts Germany will “develop the multinational headquarters in Szczecin into a hub for future regional cooperation and defence of the Alliance” with allies (Merkel 2015c). Yet, she states, “the crisis [in Eastern Ukraine] cannot be resolved by military means” and highlights continued cooperation with Russia on issues such as the Iranian nuclear negotiations (Merkel 2015c).

Rather than take a realist approach associated with military power, German speakers emphasize the need for more pacific alternatives. Reflecting on a comprehensive review of German foreign policy conducted the previous year (Federal Foreign Office 2014), Steinmeier asserted that, “far too often, people think foreign policy has only two options: either idle diplomatic chitchat or military intervention . . . [T]he foreign policy toolbox is much broader[,] and . . . we need to make use of that whole spectrum” (Steinmeier 2015a). What is favored, in contrast to force, is multilateralism. More than anything, this exemplifies how closely the regionalist and pacifist traditions in German foreign policy are intertwined and coalesce around two key lessons decision-makers have drawn from Germany’s past—“never again alone” and “never again war.” As Merkel (2017a) puts it, “the challenges of today’s world cannot be overcome by any one country alone . . . This is why I believe we need multilateral international structures.” The reference to “any one country alone” and “we” implies a self-interested, functional motivation for supporting multilateralism. But Merkel elsewhere describes multilateralism in terms that suggest there is an element of altruism, combined with the burdens of hegemonism:

[I]t’s worthwhile for every country—for smaller just as much as larger partners—to take part in multilateral processes. One key experience in these processes is that larger states are expected to make bigger concessions, that transparency and regular dialogue can avert or at least reduce misunderstandings and conflicts (Merkel 2014).

Thus, the public good of reducing conflict is supported by multilateralism, and Germany, as a larger state, will have to bear a great burden in supporting such processes. In terms of the specific types of multilateralism that Germany favors, regional ones are foremost. Speakers allude to the Iranian negotiations and the EU3 + 3, as well as the United Nations as multilateral fora, but it is the Organization for

Security and Co-operation in Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and especially the European Union that are the key sites for forging and implementing multilateral policy.

There is an interesting elision in a speech by Sigmar Gabriel between European and German engagement with multilateral networks. Gabriel asks, “[h]ow can we Germans, we Europeans, enhance our active role in that world?” (Gabriel 2017c). His answer is that “we Germans can only do that within the framework of Europe.” What follows is the portrayal of a debate between “dyed-in-the-wool Europhiles” and the implied position of others such as Gabriel. The former are seen as skeptical of calls for further engagement with the world “given that we are involved in practically all multilateral and international processes: the G20, the United Nations, the WTO, negotiations on protecting the climate,” while the latter are asking for more coordination in regional foreign policy and security (Gabriel 2017c).

Yet, this conflation of European and German interactions threatens to break down within the speech. For instance, although the European Union does engage with the bodies listed above, the United Nations would normally be seen as an intergovernmental forum, and so the implied actor would be Germany. At times, it is unclear whether this is a debate at the European level, or one within German domestic politics. The dilemma of an actor “somewhat distant and reticent about actually getting involved in the world” (Gabriel 2017c) seems much more resonant of debates in Germany, as reflected in Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s lament that, “if you ask the German public if they want their country to get more involved in the world, 60 percent of them say, ‘No, thanks!’” (Steinmeier 2015a). One could argue that rather than German interactions being subsumed within a European framework, European ones have become a projection of internal German anxieties.

When it comes to bilateral relations between Germany and other states, it is notable how focused these are on security. The two defining relationships are those with France and the United States. German and French rapprochement is continually emphasized by various speakers. Aside from the fact that the “embedded bilateralism” (Krotz and Schild 2013) between these countries has eliminated security competition in Europe’s core, the relationship is noted as salient in dealing with contemporary security challenges on Europe’s periphery like the Ukraine crisis, managed via the Normandy process (Merkel 2016). Meanwhile, the “transatlantic partnership” with the United States is described as one of three “cornerstones” of German foreign policy, alongside Europe and multilateralism (Roth 2017; Gabriel 2017d). As with the Franco-German partnership, Germany’s relations with the United States are portrayed as both providing a positive security milieu in Europe and being useful in confronting specific threats like terrorism. Despite the election of Trump, Merkel was keen to affirm that this relationship still pertained: “I want to say very clearly here that Europeans cannot win the fight against Islamist terrorism on their own. We need the military strength of the United States of America” (Merkel 2017a).

Other bilateral relationships are downplayed or absent from speeches. There is a remarkable lack of references to the United Kingdom prior to the Brexit vote, with Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s assertion in 2015 that “I cannot imagine what the values, the reputation, and the strength of European foreign policy would come to, if Great Britain weren’t a part of it!” (Steinmeier 2015a) standing out for its rarity. After Brexit, there are more efforts to acknowledge Britain’s role in European defense and security, such as its support for strengthening NATO’s eastern flank in Estonia (Merkel 2017a). Gabriel warns, “[w]e should also resist the temptation to deal overly harshly with Britain now—not out of sympathy but for reasons of self-interest. We need Britain as a partner in security policy. And Britain needs us” (Gabriel 2017c). In a speech in April 2017, Merkel asserted, “we will seek close cooperation between the EU and the United Kingdom in future . . . for example, in our joint fight against

terrorism and organized crime and in our cooperation on security and defence policy” (Merkel 2017b).

What is missing is any sense of warmth toward the United Kingdom. The Anglo-German relationship is presented in terms of instrumental transactions, reaffirming the long-standing description of German-British relations as a “silent alliance” (Kaiser and Roper 1987). As in the Gabriel quote above, self-interest rather than sympathy drives negotiations. The emphasis is on “constructive solutions” and co-operation “wherever our interests dictate it,” rather than any sense of shared values and emotional ties in the future (Merkel 2017b). The United Kingdom is described as an “important partner” (Merkel 2016), but it is left to the United Kingdom to “clarify quickly what form it wants its future relationship with the European Union to take,” and no explanation of German aspirations for bilateral relations is forthcoming.

Overall, despite the challenges that Brexit, Trump’s election, and a resurgent Russia present to German policymakers, there is remarkably little sense of the need for change in the existing configuration of beliefs about foreign policy, despite clear tensions between the four traditions. German regionalism is undermined by bilateral relations with actors such as China; pacifism is challenged by security problems on Europe’s periphery; realism is rejected on the basis of Germany’s history, pacific identity, and commitment to multilateralism; and hegemonism is resisted in case it might give rise to security competition within Europe. Yet, the solutions proposed to foreign policy problems involve multilateralism, a weak commitment to military security, and the idea that Germany’s identity and interests are subsumed within a European frame—a balance of traditions (favoring regionalism and pacifism) that has persisted for decades.

Traditional Beliefs about German Responsibility

At its simplest, responsibility is usually defined in terms of an actor’s obligation to provide a response (Gaskarth 2017, 289–290). On that basis, Germany has frequently acted responsibly to address the various crises it has faced (Crossley-Frolick 2017). Germany pioneered diplomatic engagement with Iran over its nuclear program in ways that led to a nuclear agreement with the country (Crawford 2010, 176). It provided 4,000 troops for the ISAF mission in Afghanistan (albeit with restricted rules of engagement). German resources and thinking were crucial in dealing with the Eurozone crisis (Proissl 2010), and Merkel was the lead negotiator with Russia over the Ukraine crisis, supporting punitive sanctions even where these would impact on the German economy. Germany’s acceptance of 1.1 million refugees in 2015 alone has seen it taking a larger share of the burden of managing the refugee crisis than any other country outside the Middle East. In that sense, Germany has led in coordinating responses to Europe’s major challenges.

The beliefs of German policymakers about Germany’s international responsibilities are deeply entwined with Germany’s past. They are fundamentally shaped by Germany’s collective guilt for the Holocaust and World War II and reflect shifting interpretations of Germany’s moral obligations that follow from this guilt (Seppo 2017, 199–206). From the outside, the concept of responsibility is also used to make moral judgments about German foreign policy. Germany, and Angela Merkel in particular, are depicted positively, contributing to the high levels of trust and confidence Merkel enjoys in international public opinion (Pew Research Center 2017). Rather than dominate others, Germany is seen as a “reflexive multilateralist,” which practices “leading from behind” (Paterson 2011, 57). Thus, although Germany often does bear a significant burden in responding to international challenges, German leadership is viewed as emerging from a consultative process that includes the views of smaller states. Having once been accused of possessing a “leadership avoidance reflex” (Paterson 1993), Germany is now the preeminent leader in

regional affairs—albeit a leader that acts prudently in the service of collective public goods. The style and tone of Germany's diplomacy back up these public goods by promoting multilateral, nonviolent interactions between states (Crossley-Frolick 2017). These beliefs are enabled and legitimized with reference to the traditions of pacifism, regionalism, and a particular variant of hegemony whereby Germany subordinates its political influence and resources to collective decision-making forums, especially the European Union.

Of course, such a rosy impression of Germany's motives and behavior is ripe for critique. We have seen above how commentators have described Germany as a "geo-economic power" to suggest that even though it eschews military force it still acts according to a logic of conflict—albeit one confined to economics (Kundnani 2011). Germany has provided responses to regional problems but many of these emerged from conflict and security problems outside Europe—such as the refugee movements deriving from wars in Central Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Levant, and the Maghreb—where Germany has been less active in putting forward solutions. In 2007, Franz-Josef Meiers (2007, 627) noted that "German armed forces remain the least deployable, projectable, and sustainable of the leading allied powers." This description continues to be accurate. Sperling (2010, 55) argues: "the German contribution to NATO-led missions is inconsistent with its size, interests, responsibilities, and avowed approach to the problem of regional stability"—evinced by the fact that only 10 percent of its armed forces are deployable compared to the NATO goal of 50 percent.

Therefore, in a military security sense, Germany is the least responsible actor among its allies. Viewed from outside, Germany looks like a "free rider," benefitting from the international order and stability provided by international partners without making adequate contributions itself (Hyde-Price 2015, 601–602). Against this background, international expectations have increased that German foreign policy should take on more responsibilities in international security in line with its growing economic and political power resources (Bulmer and Paterson 2016, 44).

These criticisms and expectations have left their mark on German discourse about international responsibilities. The discourse reflects a gradual reinterpretation of the lessons drawn from Germany's past, from a predominant focus on the responsibility to show restraint in the use of military force ("never again war"), to a stronger emphasis on the responsibility to take an active role in preventing international human rights violations ("never again Auschwitz") and contributing to international security (Crossley-Frolick 2017). Thus, during the Cold War, responsibility was invoked mainly to emphasize the limits on German foreign policy; it has since taken on a different connotation that supports the case for a stronger role for Germany in international politics. Leading German representatives such as Joachim Gauck (2013, 2014) and Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2014a) have become powerful voices arguing that Germany's global responsibility has increased and its history should not preclude it from acting to address global challenges. This was also one of the main themes of the 2016 security policy White Paper—particularly that Germany has a "responsibility to actively participate in shaping the global order" (Federal Government 2016, 22). Recently, the defense minister, Ursula Von der Leyen, promised Germany would accept more international responsibility, not only by upping defense spending but also by increasing Germany's contributions to the UN budget (Deutsche Welle 2018).

Overall, the dilemma facing policymakers seems to be how, and how far, Germany should move from defining responsibility in terms of restraint to adjudicating over when and how it acts abroad (Crossley-Frolick 2017). A related question in this context is how far Germany has translated its ambition into tangible action within its region. Efforts to act unilaterally, as in the refugee crisis, were saluted in some corners but also widely criticized at home and abroad. In the domestic arena, the government's approach to the crisis led to tensions between the coalition partners,

did more than anything to mobilize support for the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany party, and came to be deeply unpopular, with almost seven out of ten Germans voicing their dissatisfaction with government policy in October 2015 ([Infratest Dimap 2015](#)). While many international observers initially praised Angela Merkel for her “moral leadership” in the crisis ([New York Times 2015](#)), Germany came under increasing pressure in the European Union, in particular from Central and Eastern Europe, for presenting its European partners with a “fait accompli” and for trying to exploit European institutions for narrow national interests ([Bulmer and Paterson 2016](#), 50–53). In the security field, Germany faces calls from allies to invest more in military capability and contribute more to international military operations—framed as the responsible thing to do given Germany’s economic size. Domestically, however, there are tensions between those who wish to see Germany assume the responsibilities of a “normal” power and others who feel Germany’s main contribution to regional and global security comes from its rejection of realist behavior and embrace of pacific solutions. It is the pacifist tradition that appears to have been most dominant when it comes to defining responsibility, supported by a legitimizing emphasis on regional rather than national interests.

German Responsibility in Policy Speeches

Responsibility is one of the most commonly evoked concepts in German policy speeches, referenced more than 50 times in the 31 texts. [Steinmeier \(2015a\)](#) asserts it is “the keyword in all this” when setting out regional challenges. From a national perspective, policymakers use it to denote a leadership position. For example, Germany was described as “responsible” for the G20 when it assumed the G20 presidency in 2016. German decision-makers also see responsibility as something Germany acquires—due to its resources, wealth, and geopolitical location—rather than seeks out. Along these lines, Germany is identified as responsible in terms of specific duties, as in its security commitments in Lithuania to strengthen NATO’s border states ([Merkel 2017a](#)). Thus, Steinmeier says, “when I speak of ‘German responsibility’—I don’t mean that Germany is searching for more responsibility—I think we simply have it!” ([Steinmeier 2015a](#)). The prevailing sense among German decision-makers is that Germany has been pushed into an international leadership role more than actively seeking it ([Steinmeier 2016](#), 106). For the 2016 security policy White Paper, Germany’s “increased responsibility” is part and parcel of the “new reality” that “Germany is increasingly regarded as a key player in Europe” ([Federal Government 2016](#), 22). This can be interpreted through the tradition of hegemonism, according to which a more powerful Germany is compelled to take on leadership responsibilities due to its material primacy in the region. At the same time, the statements of decision-makers hint at a reluctance to accept a German leadership position ([Destradi 2017](#)).

More often though, Germany’s responsibility is interpreted in a wider European sense in two separable but linked ways. Most prominently, responsibility is evoked in terms of European cohesion. Policymakers talk about “a community of law founded on shared responsibility” ([Merkel 2015a](#)), “joint responsibility” ([Merkel 2017a](#)), “mutual responsibility” ([Gabriel 2017c](#)), and “structures where we assume responsibility for each other” ([Gabriel 2017b](#)). In this framing, responsibility implies mutual obligations to maintain European integration—underlining the regional focus of Germany’s moral geography. A second representation evokes responsibility as a call for greater action, particularly when it comes to global problems. Steinmeier asserted that responsibility “can only happen when, on the European level, we are able and willing not just to talk and coordinate, but to really define and carry a European responsibility in the world” ([Steinmeier 2015a](#)). Gabriel took up this rhetoric on becoming foreign minister, arguing, “we need to develop a strong Europe ready to shoulder responsibility” ([Gabriel 2017b](#)). In this framing,

responsibility must be coordinated with European partners and be an expression of collective values—thus reflecting a regionalist perspective.

According to German foreign policymakers, international expectations that Germany must act as a responsible actor on the international stage need to be manifested within a European framework. This position flowed from the findings of the review into German foreign policy in 2014 (Steinmeier 2014a). Steinmeier had argued that Germany should be an “instigator” of a common European foreign, security, and defense policy (Steinmeier 2014a, 12), and Gauck suggested “responsibility is always shared responsibility” (Gauck 2014). A similar sentiment is apparent in the period under analysis. In 2015, Steinmeier (2015b) argued that the strengthening of multilateral institutions remained a priority of German foreign policy, and the following year he argued that Germany would continue to be guided by its “European instincts” (Steinmeier 2016, 113).

At the same time, however, the speeches betray hegemonist framings of German responsibilities internationally. In line with the expectations of this tradition, it is acknowledged that Germany must shoulder more responsibilities, engage in a more active foreign policy, and show international leadership, including in military security. The theme of Germany’s “increased responsibility” was central to Steinmeier’s (2017) speech on the contribution of the Bundeswehr to training security forces in Iraq:

We never had a dry run to practice this “more responsibility” idea. We were thrown in at the deep end. The international crises have tested our readiness to assume responsibility from day one. And we rose to the challenge! This parliament did not, as is now sadly the fashion in so many parts of the world, start screaming: “Pull up the drawbridge, batten down the hatches—leave the world and its troubles outside.” Instead you all took your responsibilities seriously, and acted accordingly . . . [O]ur engagement in Iraq, is an example of this increased responsibility.

In the same speech, Steinmeier (2017) suggested that the increased responsibility of Germany in international affairs extends to decisions about the use of military force: “We have never naively viewed this responsibility as one-sided in nature. We always knew that military options might be involved. We did not however confine ourselves to military options, but tried a comprehensive political approach.” We can read intimations of conflict between traditions here, with the realist belief in force as a fundamental aspect of international relations contrasting with one subsuming it under a wider political approach, necessary to sustain a legitimate hegemony.

Similar hegemonic frames were evoked in Merkel’s (2015c) speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2015, which foregrounded how Germany assumed “direct responsibility for the security of our Alliance partners” in its role as framework nation for NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and training mission in northern Iraq. Germany was portrayed as a country “taking on responsibility” (Merkel 2017a) for European security and committed to “assuming a greater share of the defense burden” in NATO (Gabriel 2017b). The speeches thus respond to what German decision-makers earlier identified as unfair international criticism of Germany as “a spectator of global affairs” (Gauck 2013) and “the shirker in the international community” (Gauck 2014). Instead, policymakers conjured up an image of Germany as prepared to “accept responsibility, and to assume leadership” (Federal Government 2016, 23). As Steinmeier (2014b) noted, “Germany is too big to comment on world politics only from the side lines.” [I]t must engage itself “earlier, more decisively, and more substantially in foreign and security policy.”

This framing of Germany's international responsibilities, however, stands in a problematic relationship to the pacifist tradition in German foreign policy thought, precisely because Germany's enhanced responsibility extends to military security. The speeches in this period seek to reconcile tensions between the traditions in two complementary ways.

First, while the speakers recognize that military force has to be part of Germany's foreign policy toolbox, they assert that they see military force as a means of last resort that needs embedding in a broader political framework (Steinmeier 2017). In the words of Gabriel (2017c), while "it is regrettably true that we do sometimes need to use military means," the use of force must be understood, as Steinmeier (2014b) asserted years before, as "the most extreme means," which "requires restraint" (Steinmeier 2014b). In this sense, this view sits best within the regional or hegemonic traditions, since they do not eschew violence altogether as in the pacifist tradition, nor do they approach military force from the self-interested perspective of realism. Rather, force should be used to serve wider public goods, either in the regional or hegemonic interest.

Second, German decision-makers reinterpret what the pacifist tradition means for contemporary foreign policy. Specifically, they advance the argument that Germany's responsibility for promoting peace—central to the pacifist tradition—may under certain circumstances necessitate the use of military means to prevent the loss of life and human rights violations. This reappropriation of the pacifist tradition was most explicit in Gabriel's (2017e) speech in March 2017 on Germany's involvement in the EU Training Mission in Mali:

The pacifist Rupert Neudeck, who died much too soon, said that we must provide weapons to the Peshmerga, because otherwise the entire Yazidi population would be exterminated. And I reemphasise: he was a pacifist . . . One must always be fully aware that one bears responsibility not only by taking such a decision, but also by refusing to take a decision.

This is part and parcel of a broader reimagining of Germany's responsibility that emanates from its past and historical guilt over war crimes and crimes against humanity (Seppo 2017). Back in 2014, Gauck argued that when, as a "last resort," it was necessary to consider Bundeswehr deployments, "Germany should not say 'no' on principle. Nor should it say 'yes' unthinkingly" (Gauck 2014). This attitude persists in the period under analysis. The "principled" position is no longer about refusing to use force, but using it in the service of public goods.

Since the Brexit vote and Trump's election, the difficulties of navigating these competing traditions of German foreign policy have become starker. A hegemonic understanding of responsibility places the burden on the hegemon to maintain regional order and intervene when necessary to counteract destabilizing influences; however, as theorists of hegemony have long noted, this is costly and subject to challenge on legitimacy grounds (Gilpin 1987, 75; Clark 2011). Realists perceive responsible action in terms of self-interest for the national community, but, in the case of Germany, part of its drive to be a "normal" power involved embracing its regional identity to assuage concerns that it was returning to its militaristic past (Galpin 2017). Thus, the boundaries between national and regional responsibilities have blurred—evinced by the frequent elision between the terms "German" and "European" when evoking responsible actors. Lastly, the attempt to redescribe pacifism in terms of a commitment to human rights erodes the principle of nonviolence—a core belief in this intellectual tradition. Despite these tensions, an unstable consensus holds for now. The dominant pacifist and regionalist traditions have maintained a sense that Germany's responsibilities lie in finding nonviolent solutions to security problems. Military forces are deployed as a nod to hegemonic expectations but

<i>Interpretive Dimensions Traditions of Thought</i>	Identity	Interaction	Responsibility
Regionalism	European	Multilateralism	European integration
Pacifism	Civilian power	Cooperation and dialogue	Peace
Realism	Normal power	Coercion	Self-interest
Hegemonism	Reluctant hegemon	Leadership	Maintaining order and system stability

Figure 2. Four Traditions of Thought in Interpreting German Foreign Policy

their operations are conducted under strict rules of engagement—and Germany’s overall capabilities are far below those requested by allies and those expected of an actor with Germany’s material resources.

Conclusion

This article sought to provide a taxonomy of beliefs about German foreign policy via four traditions of thought: regionalism, pacifism, realism, and hegemonism. Rather than simply focus on one or two, as the existing literature does, we provided a more dynamic account of the construction of meaning by showing how these traditions exist in simultaneous and continual tension with each other. A tripartite structure of identity, interaction, and responsibility was deployed to understand how this plays out in practice. From this discussion, we can map out the traditions and how they orient beliefs about German foreign policy (see Figure 2).

Our analysis was designed not only to explore these configurations but also to consider how they were being reshaped and interpreted in response to the series of dilemmas German foreign policymakers have faced in recent years, particularly the election of Donald Trump and Brexit. It is striking that, despite the implications of these dilemmas for regional and international order, they are not leading to substantive changes in the pattern of beliefs about German foreign policy as expressed in the speeches. There are continual intimations of tension between the four traditions, and references to domestic and international calls for more realist or hegemonic approaches to security problems, but these are downplayed in favor of the longstanding pattern of beliefs centered on regionalism and pacifism.

How is this possible? First, the speeches do not address these dilemmas in a substantive fashion. There is a lack of detailed consideration of their implications, even when their potential importance is acknowledged (Gabriel 2017a). Thus, it is noted that the United States and United Kingdom are important security partners who may be less reliable in the future, but the speakers frequently deny that Germany itself will need to significantly increase its political and military contributions to fill the gap.

Second, prevailing patterns of belief are perhaps “sticky” because they are legitimized through reference to three of the four traditions—regionalism, pacifism, and a particular interpretation of hegemonism—co-opting frames of meaning from a wider part of the discourse than the remaining tradition—realism—which is thereby marginalized. When it comes to German identity, we have shown how the speeches subsume national identity within a European framework along regionalist lines. This regionalism is complemented by a strong narrative of Germany as a civilian power—a conscious effort to reject the “will to power” associated with the Nazi and Wilhelmine eras and embrace an alternative pacifist tradition. The

flipside of this is the rejection of a realist framing of German national identity. The idea that Germany might become a “normal” power, pursuing its self-interest and expanding its military power commensurate with its economic resources, has to contend with both the cooperative interpretation of regionalism put forward as well as pacifism. In addition, hegemonism, which has the potential to align with realism when it comes to the role of great powers shaping order according to their material resources, instead manifests as Germany acting as a “reluctant hegemon” that exercises power and leadership in a more diffuse way by supporting regional frameworks.

Regarding Germany’s interactions with other actors, speakers draw on regionalism and pacifism to emphasize the importance of multilateralism, peaceful cooperation, and dialogue. Hegemony, which again could be linked with realism through its implicit recognition of hierarchies of power and the legitimacy of using coercion (even force) at times to sustain order, is instead interpreted as Germany having a duty to exercise leadership on civilian matters but by consent and through institutional frameworks. Guilt over Germany’s past, the risk of a security dilemma emerging, and the idea that Germany is actually only a “small fish” globally were three reasons used to defend this interpretation. A benign, civilianized hegemony is considered more appropriate.

In other words, when it comes to both identity and interaction, the traditions of regionalism, pacifism, and hegemonism are aligned to promote a particular interpretation of German foreign policy and marginalize realist alternatives. This suggests that German foreign policy will continue to promote multilateral cooperation and dialogue at a time when other powers seem to be turning to unilateralism. Germany’s leading role in multilateral diplomatic initiatives to achieve a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Eastern Ukraine is a case in point (Hellmann 2016, 7–8). In particular, Germany can be expected to stand against possible centrifugal dynamics of European integration after Brexit and put its weight behind efforts to avoid European disintegration. That has already been on display during the Brexit negotiations in which Germany was critical, behind the scenes, in developing and maintaining a unified position of the EU-27 and in preventing individual member states from breaking the European consensus (Taggart et al. 2017). At the same time, however, the dominant reading of Germany’s foreign policy orientation will likely come under increasing pressure when German ambitions to provide multilateral leadership in Europe are frustrated and fail to mobilize followership, as was arguably the case during the refugee crisis (Bulmer and Paterson 2016). Over time, this has the potential to unsettle the uneasy consensus about Germany’s identity and interactions and to push realist interpretations to center stage.

When it comes to responsibility, moreover, the tensions in this consensus are particularly notable. The overall sense one gets from the speeches is that traditional understandings of Germany’s foreign policy are under strain. The election of Trump challenged the tradition of pacifism through calls for higher military spending. Suddenly, Germany has found itself portrayed as irresponsible for not having sufficient belligerent capabilities. This was also driven home by human rights crises where Germany either did not intervene—as in Libya—or was only willing or able to contribute logistically. Meanwhile, crises in the Eurozone and the Mediterranean, as well as Brexit, have posed dilemmas for the tradition of regionalism and the benign hegemonic role favored by German policymakers. Calls for Germany to increase its contribution to regional and international security draw attention to Germany’s national power and regional dominance. Efforts to carry the burden of dealing with refugees led to a domestic backlash and the rise of parties emphasizing national self-interest and domestic over international responsibilities along realist lines (Galpin 2017).

Arranged against all of this is a deeply embedded pattern of belief about German responsibilities that has arguably existed since the end of the Second World War.

This defines responsible action as a commitment to peace, cooperation, dialogue, and the forgoing of the use of force (at least when it comes to warfighting). It sustains itself by drawing on the traditions of regionalism, pacifism, and a hegemonism based on institutional frameworks. However, a difficult period of contestation lies ahead. The increasing salience of military security in Europe threatens to expose the limitations and ambiguities in the dominant interpretation of what the responsibilities of Germany are. This is nowhere more evident than in German decisions on whether or not to participate in international military operations, which tend to be highly controversial (Brummer and Oppermann 2016), precisely because they often bring the different traditions of thought in German foreign policy into direct conflict. The existing configuration of beliefs, however, makes it unlikely that Germany will become a more consistent and reliable provider of military security, and thus a stronger pillar of the transatlantic security architecture, anytime soon. Given its history, there is a certain irony in the dilemma that Germany will either have to break with domestic traditions and adopt a more realist understanding of foreign policy in order to be that pillar of security or stick with tradition and risk losing international support and the weakening of international institutions like NATO on which Germany security depends.

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